

BIBLICAL APPLICATION: A CASE FOR STANDARDS

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"'Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.... .. And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition' (Mar 7:7 & 9). Jesus clearly denounced and rebuked those who taught a man-made tradition (a commandment of men) as if it was a divine truth (a commandment of God)" (M Tossell, 'Bible truth or Baptist tradition', *Biblical Builder*, July-Aug 2011, p. 14-15).

"... I am thankful that I saw the error of these religious customs. I was encouraged that our Independent Baptist churches are free from such traditions because we adhere to the principle of *Sola Scriptura* -- Scripture only. That is, we believe and teach that the Bible is our sole authority for faith and practice" (ibid., p. 14).

After making this statement, the author of this article makes the point that he believes that in some cases Fundamental churches are guilty of teaching the commandments of men as if they were inspired Scripture. He finishes by warning that some such churches have exchanged liberty for bondage (ibid., p. 18).

I will be the first one to concede that the believer who is in earnest about living a holy life is in a far greater danger of legalism than a believer who is not so intent on pleasing God, (see sermons from Romans series *The Law of God and the Heart of Man* Part B and especially Part C, Rom. 7:7-25) (*The Law of God and the Heart of Man*, audio recording, Tamworth Bible Baptist Church, Tamworth, 2008, www.tbbsc.org.au).

Biblical standards will always provoke rebellion from the flesh (Rom. 7:8). The unsaved live in the flesh. The saved have a distinct advantage for they have the spirit dwelling within, but they also have a battle with the flesh. Therefore what are we to do with laws and Biblical standards derived from those laws? Does that mean we should jettison the traditional Fundamentalist approach to teaching Biblical standards? Should we just let the Holy Spirit do the work on the new converts as they read Scripture for themselves? Is there really no Biblical warrant for bringing clarity to the many complex yet critical contemporary issues that war against the souls of multitudes of believers today? Over these questions Bible believers today are divided.

Scott Aniol has put his finger on a key theological practice that has largely determined the thinking of Bible believers of our day when it comes to formation of Bible standards in general. This practice is foundational to every area which touches on practical Holiness and will certainly also determine how we approach the formation of a music philosophy. That is why it appears as the very first chapter under the first section, 'Laying the Foundation' of Aniol's book, *Worship in Song*. The chapter is entitled, 'Biblical Authority in Matters of Faith and Practice' (S Aniol, *Worship in song*, BMH Books, Winona Lake, USA, 2009, p. 1). It evaluates two different ways that Bible believers apply the Scriptures in their lives. It is not talking about differences in how believers understand Biblical inspiration, neither is it discussing literal versus allegorical interpretation of the Bible. It is dealing with two different methods of Biblical application. Aniol describes these two different methods.

Generally, approaches to the Bible's applicability to life fall into two categories. Some deny that the Bible can be applied to contemporary moral situations with any real authority, and yet others insist that as long as the Bible is interpreted and applied correctly, authoritative ethical standards may be formulated even for issues not explicitly addressed in the Scripture (ibid., p. 4).

Aniol describes the essential features of the first position which is called, 'An Encyclopedic View of Scripture' (ibid.). Then he outlines three distinctives of the second position, calling it 'An Encompassing View of Scripture' (ibid., p. 5).

Though the Encyclopedic view of Scripture seems initially to be a very strong position, upon closer examination it proves to be wanting. Aniol cites Murray, Robinson and Swindoll as proponents of the Encyclopedic view. They make their appeal to Rom. 14 and I Cor. 8-10, using these Scriptures as the basis to dismiss the formulation of values on any subject that is not explicitly addressed by Scripture, from skimpy swimwear to abortion (ibid., pp. 4-5).

The argument goes like this: that on the basis of a mere difference of opinion over things not expressly addressed in the Bible, there should be no division in the body of Christ and room left for Christian liberty to be exercised. However, not only does this fly in the face of clear Biblical texts that are discussed later on in this article (see pp. 4-5), we also notice that the specific issues Paul is dealing with in the above proof texts (Rom. 14 and I Cor. 8-10) in no way impinge true spirituality. That is to say: the actual grievances themselves were over merely trifling matters of the ceremonial law, things to do with Jewish dietary regulations and observance of days (D Moo, *The epistle to the Romans*, W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1996, p. 827). Therefore, it would appear that these Scriptures do not constitute an adequate precedent to dismiss all intelligent discernment and formulation of principles about the many complex and weighty contemporary issues that believers have to contend with in our day.

However, like Murray, Robinson and Swindoll, many believers understand that extra Biblical contemporary issues, such as music, clothing, entertainment and 'methodology of ministry' should fall into the category of things that are indifferent (M Tossell, 'Some things are worth fighting for', *Biblical Builder*, Nov-Dec 2008, p. 11).

They say that because the Bible is silent, they also will remain silent.

Now, theological consistency in the ministry is an area we all fall short in, but when we realise that inconsistency we should make adjustments in our thinking accordingly. Some of us are inconsistent when it comes to our approach to Biblical application. We vacillate between the Encyclopedic view and the Encompassing view. There are those who perhaps would not go as far as Murray, Robinson or Swindoll, but on some occasions they find themselves tempted to drift into the Encyclopedic mindset because it is convenient. However, they see no inconsistency, if it suits them, to switch to the Encompassing approach to application.

For example, consider the fundamentalist who magnifies his belief in *Sola Scripture* (Scripture only) and makes that his theological justification for remaining passive on 'hot potato' contemporary issues; yet he, for example, believes strongly that he must contend for the 'KJV only' position. Now, if he is to give any reasonable defence for his position, he must at some point, move beyond general Scriptural statements to the actual data itself (the handling of which is informed and guided by those general Scriptural statements). This necessarily involves the technicalities of sifting through both historical and manuscript evidence (RB Ouellette, 'A more sure text: the superiority of the received text', *The Biblical Builder*, July-Aug 2011, pp. 4-6). The moment he does that, he concedes to the validity of the *Encompassing* approach to application. But he cannot have his theology of Biblical application both ways. Either the Encompassing approach is right and the Encyclopedic approach is wrong or the Encyclopedic approach is right and Encompassing approach is wrong.

We need to think very clearly about this. If any theory about anything does not hold up in every particular case, it is not watertight and should therefore be jettisoned. Scott Aniol proposes the test case of abortion for the Encyclopedic theory of application.

One example of such a process that even proponents of the Encyclopedic view practice is with the issue of abortion. Few, if any, conservative Christians would defend the practice of abortion. They insist that abortion is murder. But do they find explicit statements within Scripture condemning it as murder? They may reply that the killing of a human being is always murder. However, where does the Bible explicitly state that unborn infants are human beings? Furthermore, is all killing murder (S Aniol, pp. 17-18)?

At the risk of being repetitive, I think it is important that we recognise we cannot have it both ways. Either the Encyclopedic method of application is correct or it is incorrect and if it is incorrect, it must therefore give way to the broader view of application, the Encompassing method.

The Encyclopedic view is held strongly by some of those who come from a Reformed background and they believe that they are standing on the highest possible ground Biblically. In

fact, they claim to be standing exactly where Martin Luther stood when he argued against the Roman Catholic Church on the basis of *Sola Scriptura* (a Latin term 4

indicating that Scripture should be our sole authority). Naturally, they feel they have the weight of Protestant tradition on their side. But is this really what Luther and the Reformers meant when they coined the theological term *Sola Scriptura*? Scott Aniol does not think so.

He points to Article VI of the Westminster Confession of Faith:

“The whole Council of God, concerning all things necessary to his own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, *or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture*: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Scripture, or traditions of men [emphasis added] (ibid., p. 7; James E. Bordwine, *A guide to the Westminster confession of faith and larger catechism*, The Trinity Foundation, 1991, pp. 5-6).

This paragraph clearly contains a clause which mandates obedience to that which follows as a good and necessary consequence of logical deductions based upon the principles that are clearly taught in Scripture.

It seems plain that some contemporary Reformers have either misunderstood what their forefathers have written or else they have succumbed to the enormous pressure of our day to accommodate their theology to worldly practices.

In any case it is very certain that the Bible will not sustain this error any more than would the Westminster Confession of Faith.

Firstly, I would point to a basic principle of Scripture which relates to the subject at hand. It is what theology books call ‘general revelation’: the revelation of truth being deduced from observation of the things that God has created.

The question ought to be asked, ‘Does God hold man responsible for truth revealed to him from other sources apart from the Scripture?’ If we are forbidden to take those extra Biblical sources into account to determine truth, how can God be just in holding human beings to account on the basis of truth revealed through those very things?

On this subject, the Bible is not silent.

“The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard. Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world” (Psa. 19:1-4 5).

“...Verse 1 is a summary statement: the majestic creation is evidence of the even more majestic creator God... Even though creation does not speak audibly its message (voice) goes out to the ends of the earth. The message from nature about the glory of God reaches all nations, and is equally intelligible to them all (cf. Rom. 1:18-20)” (JF Walvoord & RB Zuck, *The Bible knowledge commentary: an exposition of the scriptures by Dallas seminary faculty*, Victor Books, a division of Scripture press publications Inc, USA, 1985, p. 807).

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse” (Rom. 1:18-20).

From this powerful Scripture we see that all men on the planet, as intelligent beings, created in the image of God, even in their fallen state, have knowledge of things about God through the observation of creation alone. The Scriptures says specifically they understand 'his eternal power and Godhead'. Then it goes on to say that on that basis 'they are without excuse', but Paul is not here say anything about the judgement.

It is taken for granted that they can reasonably deduce that they are liable to judgement. Although we are not told specifically how they obtain the knowledge of judgement coming, (Rom. 1:32) it is implied that it is by virtue of their powers of reason and conscience, that they know they are accountable to the all-powerful God of truth whose righteousness they knowingly suppress (D Moo, pp. 104-105).

From this we can see that God does expect man to use his reasoning power and his conscience to discern truth. Surely, it is not as certain as Scripture, but it is certain enough to render them without excuse on the day of judgement. We also see that this use of his powers of reason to deduce truth from his surroundings is not optional for man. God requires it of him, to the extent where he is culpable if he does not exercise this faculty of discernment to arrive at moral truth.

Beyond this basic faculty of deducing knowledge available to all men on the basis of the things in the creation that are clearly seen, God requires men, especially regenerated men, to pass moral judgements about things that are not immediately obvious.

“Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil” (I Thess. 5:21-22).

Here the Greek word that is translated ‘prove’ means to test, to approve or allow, to discern or examine, to try (J Strong, *The exhaustive concordance of the Bible*, Greek dictionary of the New Testament, Riverside Book and Bible House, Iowa Falls, Iowa, USA, p. 24). The main point is that the application of this word is to ‘all things’, not just the things that are written verbatim in Scripture. If it referred narrowly to things contained literally in Scripture, then that would require

merely an accurate knowledge of Scripture, not an ability to discern as the meaning behind the original word translated 'prove' mandates.

Further to that, after the discerning process we are expected to have made distinctions between two categories: on the one hand, ***'that which is good'*** (emphasis added), on the other hand ***'all appearance of evil'*** (emphasis added). The words 'all appearance' are Greek words which, in contemporary language, would be more accurately understood as 'every form' (A T Robinson, Word pictures in the New Testament, Vol. IV the epistles of Paul, Harper & Bros publishes, New York, 1931, p. 38).

To summarise, the passage requires us to abstain from *every form* of evil, not just those forms catalogued in Scripture and it tells us to do so after having scrutinised 'all things' of which 'all appearance of evil' is a subset. The use of the superlative, 'all' in both the main set and the subset demand that we reject *every form* of extra Biblical evil, after a thorough examination of the evidence.

“And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; That ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ” (Phil. 1:9-10).

Here again we have the same Greek word which means to test, to scrutinise or to recognise as genuine after examination (J Strong, p. 24). It is the word translated 'approve', contained in vs. 10. We are told to ***'approve things that are excellent'*** (emphasis added) in order that we might ***'be sincere and without offence'*** (emphasis added).

The passage therefore teaches that one means of demonstrating our love towards God and our fellow man is by being desirous to ***'abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgement'*** (emphasis added). Why does God connect abounding love this way with ever increasing knowledge in all judgement? This is the reason. To make enquiry into true knowledge and judgement in difficult areas is pleasing to God and truly helpful to our fellow believers because it is actually providing a much-needed service to the church and that service glorifies God because it edifies the body of Christ. The faculty to be able to discern right from wrong in difficult yet critical areas is something that God highly prizes and is a mark of Christian maturity.

“For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil” (Heb. 5:13-14).

Therefore, a thorough examination of extra Biblical things that are questionable is not only permissible, it is a command. Not only that; if we fail to obey this command, the Scripture itself calls into question the sincerity of our love for God and the brethren. Therefore we ought to conclude that the Encyclopedic method of application should be discarded. At the very least,

such a serious misunderstanding would promote a significant retardation in spiritual growth (Heb. 5:13-14).

Beyond that, an Encyclopedic view of Scripture application has other very serious consequences. It renders the Bible to be without teeth, effectively making it irrelevant in many areas of practical life. It builds a system around the letter, albeit the New Testament letter, of the law (Rom. 7:6, II Cor. 3:6), from which the Spirit of God is forbidden to take His people on to practical obedience in the labyrinth of complex and multifaceted moral issues that face believers today. Without a doubt this is, paradoxically, a modern form of legalism, which stifles the liberty of specific application of Biblical principle to contemporary situations: situations into which the Spirit of Holiness wants to speak and to give His people guidance in an increasingly confusing world.

Therefore the Encyclopedic view champions merely the letter of the law, but does violence to the Spirit of liberty. It certainly appears to be a convenient deviation from what Scripture actually teaches and could be interpreted by others as an act of theological cowardice on the part of some contemporary Reformers. In fact, in the long run, they may be found to be of an altogether different spirit to their godly forefathers who bravely risked their lives for the sake of truth.

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